Rocking the Boat: The Effects of Status Change on Helping Behaviors within Hierarchical Groups

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ABSTRACT

When examining how people behave within hierarchies, researchers commonly take a snapshot of the current hierarchy, overlooking the status shifting that may have just occurred. The current research takes a more dynamic perspective to status within groups, examining how the experience of individual status change, both status loss and status gain (as compared to not changing in status), influences helping behaviors within hierarchical groups. Namely, I argue there are asymmetries in how helping behaviors are influenced by status change. That is, individuals who lose status will help less than individuals whose status does not change; however, individuals who gain status will not necessarily help commensurately more. I have conducted two studies which together test the asymmetry effect of status change on helping, provide evidence for *why* this asymmetry occurs (i.e., changes in other orientation: the tendency for people to focus on collective qualities or joint inputs contributing to the group's success), and identify a critical boundary condition for the effect (i.e., source of change: whether status change is framed as being due to a personal change or due to a relative others' change).

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Functional models of hierarchy assume that social hierarchy increases cooperation and coordination by simplifying the social order, signaling to individuals who defers to whom (Halevy, Chou, & Galinsky, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). However, much of this logic follows the assumption that hierarchy is stable; people know where they stand, where others stand *and* this does not change. When examining how people behave within hierarchies, researchers commonly take a snapshot of the current hierarchy, overlooking the status shifting that may have just occurred.

Given that change is rife in organizations, hierarchy is not entirely stable. People may achieve status success through promotions and climb the hierarchy, or descend as they are demoted and move down the organizational ranks. Moreover, not only do people shift status positions, but mobility is encouraged in many organizations whereby the culture facilitates employees to climb the ranks (sometimes at the expense of other employees). Thus it is necessary to better understand the behavioral implications of status change within hierarchies.

I attempt to answer part of this broader question by examining how individual status change affects helping behaviors within hierarchical groups. On one hand status change may increase helping. Status change may signal that individuals are being put into the correct status positions. That is, as status sorting occurs over time, hierarchies will correct themselves and individuals who shift status positions may ultimately end up where they were meant to be. When people perceive that individuals within their group are ranked appropriately, the hierarchy is seen as legitimate, which would likely increase helping given that the hierarchy is seen as fair and just. On the other hand, status change can be aversive for the stress and anxieties that people

incur when they feel their social order is unstable (Zink et al, 2008). Because of this, status change and the subsequent perceptions of hierarchy instability, heighten sensitivities that one's own and others' status is uncertain, resulting in status contests and conflicts as people vie for high status positions within their groups (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Groysberg, Polzer, & Elfenbein, 2011). Thus it is currently unclear how status change may influence helping and a clearer understanding of this relationship is warranted.

The current paper attempts to shed light on the effects of status change on helping, by first unpacking how the individual experience of status change affects psychological concerns which affect the likelihood to help others in one's group (Chapter 1). Further, I will extrapolate these individual level effects to the group to examine the implications of group level change on helping, or the overall level of helping within groups (Chapter 2). Specifically, I will examine how individual status change, in terms of both status loss and status gain, affect other-orientation (i.e. the tendency for people to focus on collective qualities or joint inputs contributing to the success of the group), thereby affecting helping. Namely, I propose that people who lose status will become less other-oriented thus making them less likely to help than individuals who gain status or whose status does not change. Moreover, while it may be assumed that individuals who gain status should be more likely to help than individuals who do not change status, I argue that there are asymmetries in how helping behaviors are influenced by status losses and gains such that while status loss decreases helping, status gains will not necessarily increase helping and may even decrease it as compared to those who do not change. That is, when thinking about the net effects of status change on helping behavior, it might be assumed that status loss and status gain should equally and oppositely influence helping. Just as status is often assumed to be zero sum (i.e., one person's loss in status means another person's gain in status), I challenge the

assumption that the behavioral implications of status follow this same zero sum pattern (i.e., one person's decrease in helping due to status loss may not mean another person will increase helping due to status gain).

Status and Status Hierarchy

Status is defined as "the prominence, respect, and influence individuals enjoy in the eyes of others" (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001, p. 116). Therefore, an individual's status depends on their social environment and is directly tied to how others view them (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980). Status provides individuals an indication of their social worth and is very valuable to individuals for the multitude of psychological and physical rewards that may be afforded to those in high status positions (Akinola & Mendes, 2014; Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky & Keltner, 2012; Berger et al. 1980; Humphrey, 1985; Marmot, 2005; Merton, 1968; Singh-Manoux, Marmot & Adler, 2005; Weber, 1978).

Within groups, hierarchies represent how much status each person has relative to one another. While the amount of status an individual has within the group may be affected in certain organizations by static characteristics such as race or gender (e.g., Inesi & Cable, 2014; Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004), status is largely influenced by variable properties such as perceptions of competence, performance, or value to the group's task at any given time (Bunderson, Van der Vegt, & Sparrowe, 2013; Fragale, 2006; Gardner, 2012; Oldroyd & Morris, 2012; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996). Unlike power, which is determined more objectively by the amount of control or resources an individual has, judgments of status leave room for others' subjective evaluations of an individual's worth or value to the group (Blader & Chen, 2014).

Indeed, it is human nature to accurately understand the world and those around us. Thus it is no wonder that we constantly evaluate and reevaluate our perceptions of others, and thus

status. As such, status can change over time, and individuals may either increase or decrease the amount of respect or prestige they hold in the eyes of others as they gain or lose status (Marr & Thau, 2014; Neely, 2013; Pettit, Sivanathan, Gladstone, & Marr, 2013). Given the relative nature of status within hierarchical groups, status is often thought to be a zero-sum property of groups, with one person's gain coming at the expense of another person's loss. That is, when one person gains more relative respect within a group, others begin to be seen as having relatively less status within that group.

Whether people are achieving social success and gaining status, or social backsliding as they lose status, it is likely that people will frequently experience personal changes in their social status (Demange, 2004; Graffin, Bundy, Porac, Wade, & Quinn, 2013; Jordan, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2011). For instance, it is not uncommon to find examples in the media of CEOs or athletes, who were once highly revered by the public, involved in something that decreases their once held esteem. Likewise, we relish in the real life "Cinderella stories" where people are thrust from the bottom rungs to positions of high esteem. On a smaller scale, weekly 'bleacher reports' or college rankings remind us that even if it is only by a small amount, it is common to move up or down the hierarchical order. Indeed, whether we are moving up and down a hierarchy ourselves or being reminded of the instabilities that exist through our media channels, status shifting is a pervasive feature of our everyday lives.

Despite the fact that status within hierarchies is often not stable, much of the literature to date has focused on how people experience and respond to their status position within a hierarchy at one moment in time. The current research seeks to better understand how status change influences helping behaviors within groups. To do so requires a deeper understanding of the experience of status change.

Status Change and the Psychological Experience of Change

Given the value of status, it is generally accepted that people would prefer to maintain high status (or avoid losing status) and would prefer leaving low status (or gain status rather than maintaining this position). As such people should be very sensitive to status changes, with extant work showing psychological and behavioral reactions of potential changes. That is, the mere *potential* of a gain vs. a loss shapes behavior and cognition (Pettit et. al, 2013). Helping, in particular, is a commonly researched method of managing one's status when there is the potential to change one's status in the future. Such work highlights the fact that helping others can serve to maintain or enhance one's status (i.e., status striving) by advertising one's expertise or value to the group (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006).

While the potential to change status has been shown to influence a multitude of behaviors intended to manage one's status, until recently (Marr & Thau, 2014; Neely, 2014), considerably less work has looked at the behavioral and psychological consequences of an *actual* gain or loss. Marr & Thau (2014) found that for high status individuals, incurring a status loss can negatively impact future performance, an outcome which ironically works against any attempts of regaining the status that they lost. While this literature has largely focused on self experienced outcomes of change (i.e., performance), it begins to suggest that when people experience a status change, they do not necessarily behave in ways that would serve to manage their future status.

In the current research, we move beyond the status management perspective-- as is typical in understanding how people manage *potential* changes—and seek to further understand and build theory around how people experience actual status changes and how this experience shapes their orientation and subsequent helping behaviors towards others. Despite the fact that status conferral is a social exchange and how one reacts and behaves towards others is likely to

be affected, the ways in which status changes shape our attention and behavior *towards others* in the status hierarchy has been largely ignored. Indeed, hierarchy functionality is often contingent on group members cooperating and working together, therefore understanding the effects of status change on behaviors towards others becomes of great importance.

The Effect of Status Change on Other Orientation and Helping

Status change occurs because of reevaluations in the contributions that one is perceived to be making to the group relative to others. That is, status is either granted or taken away over time depending on how much one is perceived to be putting towards the group or the group's goals, relative to others and how much they had previously put towards the group or the group's goals. Status change is likely to be a very different experience for individuals depending on the direction of the change.

People have expectations for how their status should change—and in general people of all status levels desire to either increase or maintain their status. For instance, people are more inclined to accelerate momentum of status when it is moving upwards (Pettit et al, 2013). In the media, we are more inclined to take notice of those individuals who fall in the hierarchy, or lose status, perhaps because their downward momentum is inconsistent with our natural expectations of status trajectory. Much of the literature to date focuses on status creation and attainment highlighting the biases that people seem to have about the natural trajectory of status (Neely, 2013, page 477). Moreover, when considering expectations of personal status trajectory, this bias is likely to be even more pronounced (i.e., self enhancement biases). When people make contributions towards the group or the group's goals, however small or large they may be, it is expected that one's value to the group should naturally increase. Much like the above average effect, it is likely that people are biased to forget the relativity of status, and despite the fact that

every person within a hierarchy cannot always increase their relative status (rather, one person's relative gain necessitates a relative loss), individuals are inclined to think that their status should be maintained or naturally increase over time. A status change that is inconsistent with expectations for status trajectory (i.e., status loss) will result in violations of expectations whereas those changes consistent with expectations for status trajectory will result in non-violations (i.e., status maintenance or gain).

Losing status violates expectations for status trajectory and is an aversive experience with the potential to influence an individual's behaviors towards others in the group. Experiencing a status loss is a "perceived evaluation of status diminution" (Neely, 2013). Regardless of one's objective value to the group, perceptions of relative status loss are often conceptualized in terms of one's own personal status being lessened by others for some reason. As compared to individuals who maintain their status (even if one is low status, but maintains it), having something and then experiencing it being actively taken away or diminished can lead to a decrease in social connectedness (Twenge et al, 2007), resentment and distrust towards *others* (Neely, 2013), and the perception that one's social network is 'unreliable' resulting in abandonment and stress (Hawkley et al, 2012, Uchino, 2006). The decline in social support and detachment from the group as a result of this status diminuition is likely to lead to a decrease in other- orientation (e.g., Grant, 2007), a critical determinant of helping (De Dreu & Nauta, 2009). Therefore, when people incur a loss, as opposed to not changing in status (even if one is low status), expectations are violated which could fuel a decrease in other orientation and subsequent helping.

Experiencing a status gain, on the other hand, is consistent with expectations for status trajectory. Much like maintaining status, rising in status is experienced as something that is

expected, or a non-violation, of status trajectory. However, in comparison to maintaining status individuals will not necessarily be more inclined to help their group. That is, people should not experience an increase in status as something that is unexpected. Even when gain is unearned, people engage in "status rationalization" (Neely & Dumas, 2016) when they rise in status to justify why their movement upward in the hierarchy is not necessarily surprising or unusual. Therefore, as compared to not changing in status, a status gain should not result in a "boost" in other orientation or helping.

H1: *Individuals who experience a status loss will help less than individuals who experience a gain or do not change in status.*

H2: *The negative effect of status loss on helping will be mediated by a decrease in other orientation.*

Source of Status Change

While I have argued that status loss should lead to a decreased willingness to help one's teammates (through decreased other-orientation), this may not always be the case. That is, status loss within a hierarchy can happen in two distinct ways. Within hierarchy, one's status is directly tied to the status of others, as each group member provides a reference point for the amount of status that each individual has relative to them. Therefore one may incur a status loss; 1) because their own status actively drops (the amount of respect or prestige that they once had is directly diminished), or 2) because other people within the hierarchy elevated their status, resulting in status loss (the reference point for status changes and thus even if individual status did not directly change, they will lose status relative to others). While both result in the same outcome

(i.e., a loss in status), the experience of such a change is likely to have different effects on other-orientation and helping.

My prior theorizing on the effect of status loss on helping has been rooted in the assumption that status loss is an active drop in one's status. Status loss incurred this way, perhaps due to a personal decrease in performance (Marr & Thau, 2014) or a lack of skill proficiency (Neely, 2013) within the group, has clear implications for a decrease in other-orientation. While perhaps more common that status loss occurs because of an active drop (and thus the focus of my paper to this point), status loss incurred through others gaining may have very different implications for helping and thus warrant further understanding.

In the current context, given that individual's status has been seen as 'dropping', losing status and the momentum downward highlights an "I sink, while you swim" mentality making people less apt to feel supported by their fellow group members as they are actively experiencing a drop in status while others are not (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Tjosvold, 1998), ultimately decreasing other-orientation. On the other hand, when a status loss occurs due to others gaining status, an individual has not actively dropped in status. Rather, other members of the group to which one belongs have gained. In contrast to the "I sink" mentality inherent in the momentum downward and a personal drop, when others are moving upward the source of the momentum changes. That is, the elevation upward of one's peers may be viewed in a "You swim, we all swim" mentality. Given that an individual's status is intractably tied to the overall status of the group (and the members that compose it), a gain by others (so long as one's own is not actively dropping) may increase perceptions that others are positively supporting them and cause individuals to feel proud to be a member of a collective with such rising stars. That is, when others gain, this offers opportunity that one's own personal status could rise in the future.

Therefore, when some group members gain status, even if it results in a relative status loss for the self, an individual should not be as likely to experience the same degree of psychological detachment from the group, and subsequent decreased other-orientation.

Accordingly, I argue that the effect of status loss on helping may depend on the source of that change. To this point, the bulk of my theorizing has focused on how status loss, relative to non-loss, influences helping. That said, just as people may lose status because of personal momentum or others changing relative to oneself, people may gain status in such ways as well. However, based on prior research that suggests that gaining status is not experienced in the equal and opposite way as losing status (Fast & Chen, 2009; Knight & Mehta, 2014), I do not anticipate the source of status gain to affect other-orientation and downstream helping in a similar manner. Namely, this disconnect is based off of the expectation that I detail in the next section that there are potential asymmetries of status loss and gain. Just as I suggest that a status gain does not necessarily promote increased helping per se (detailed in next section), I suggest that the source of status change will uniquely affect other-orientation, and subsequent helping, for people experiencing a status loss. Thus I focus my moderation hypothesis on status loss, and the source of that loss, to hypothesize that:

H3: *The indirect effect of status loss on helping will be moderated by source of change, such that when the change occurs due to personal status loss, people will help less than when the change occurs due to others' status gains.*

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

I test my hypotheses across two studies. Specifically, Study 1 experimentally manipulates status loss, gain or no change and provides evidence both for the main effect of status loss on decreased helping behaviors and the mediation of loss on helping through decreased other

orientation. In Study 2, I manipulate the source of change and examine when the effect of status loss on helping (through other orientation) may not occur (i.e., when a status loss is due others gaining status).

STUDY 1

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and sixty nine undergraduate students from a US university enrolled in an introductory management course participated in exchange for extra credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: *Status loss, Status gain, or no status change*.

Procedure. Upon arriving to the laboratory, participants were seated at a computer terminal where they completed their consent form and were given additional instructions verbally and on the computer. The study was broadly described as being about decision making, and that they would first be randomly linked with other members within the study session to form a group that they will be working with throughout the remainder of the study. They will complete two rounds of a group task to assess their status within the group, after which they will complete an additional group task.

To bolster the cover story that they are working with other students in the study session, once participants are told that they have been assigned to their group and prior to beginning the group tasks where they will be assigned their status, they are asked to write a brief message to their group members and likewise receive ostensible messages from their group members (Marr & Thau, 2014).

All participants are led to believe that they are assigned to a group of 4 students, and thus working with 3 other individuals. Once assigned and introduced to their group members via the

computer, participants will be told that the formation of hierarchy is important for group decision making, and thus the next couple of tasks (completed with their group members at individual computer terminals) will be used to assess the hierarchy for the group.

Specifically, participants will complete a series of two 'idea persuasion tasks' adapted from Marr and Thau (2014). Participants will choose one topic, out of a list of three, to write a persuasive argument about (i.e., "Is the cost of college too high?"). After 4 minutes of writing, they are automatically advanced to a new screen where they will be instructed to read ostensible arguments written by their fellow 3 group members. Once they have read each response, they are given 10 "respect points" which they are asked to dole out to their group members (they are not able to give themselves any points). As such, they may receive anywhere between 0-30 respect points total from their group members. In the status loss condition, participants are told that are in the 73rd percentile of their group for respect points. In the status gain condition, participants are told that are in the 43rd percentile of their group for respect points.

Participants then complete another round of the persuasion task, choosing one topic, from a list of three, to write a persuasive argument on. Once again, participants have 4 minutes to write about their chosen topic and instructed to read their group member's responses upon advancing to the next screen. This time, however, participants are given the opportunity to "redistribute" their 10 respect points amongst their three group members based on their responses after argument 2. Once they have redistributed their group members' points, they are shown how many respect points they now personally have after argument 2. Both conditions are told that they now rank in the 58th percentile of respect points for their group, indicating that they have lost/gained respect points within their group from Argument 1 to Argument 2.

Participants then report their degree of other orientation using three items as developed by De Dreu and Nauta (2009) (e.g., "I am concerned about the needs and interests of others in my group") and assessed on a 7-item scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Extremely)*.

Participants will then complete the next group task and told that a high group score is beneficial for the group. As adapted from Klein (2003), this task is a version a hangman task, where individuals tried to solve a word, when provided some of the letters for that word. Participants are told that half of their group members (including the participant) are assigned as the "hint providers" for this task (choosing which letters the individual completing the task sees), and half of their group members are assigned as "hint receivers." They were told that the computer has randomly linked them with a group member, and that they will have the opportunity to provide hints to this individual.

After finishing the hangman task, participants completed a brief post-task questionnaire including demographics. After completing the post task questions, participants are debriefed before exiting the lab.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. All participants correctly answered the manipulation check question and thus included in the final sample.

Helping. A one-way ANOVA between conditions shows that participants in the status loss condition helped less (M = 3.82, SD = 1.25) than individuals in the status gain condition (M = 3.92, SD = .88), p = .001 and in the no status change condition (M = 4.27, SD = .79), p =01. There was no difference between helping in the status gain and no status change conditions, p=.36.

Other orientation. Participants in the status loss condition reported lower other orientation (M = 3.99, SD = 1.48) than individuals in the status gain condition (M = 4.68, SD = 1.17), p = .008 and in the no status change condition (M = 4.58, SD = 1.42), p =02. There was no difference between other orientation in the status gain and no status change conditions, p=.69.

Mediation Analysis. To examine whether the negative effect of loss (versus no change and gain) on helping is due to a decrease in other orientation, I followed Hayes & Preacher (2014)'s use of contrast codes to examine the relative indirect, direct, and total effects of each condition (e.g., loss vs. gain while controlling for no change). Results showed a significant total effect of status loss on helping (β = -.62, p =.001) and a significant effect of status loss on other orientation (β = -.70, p =.008). Results also show that the effect of loss on helping decreased when the proposed mediator, other orientation, was included in the model (β = -.52, p =.005). Using 5,000 confidence intervals, results support the presence of a significant indirect effect, as the confidence interval did not include zero (95% Confidence Interval: Lower CI=-.25; Upper CI=-.01, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Taken together, these findings provide support that individuals who lose status help less than individuals who gain status or who do not change status, an effect driven in part due to decreased other orientation.

STUDY 2

Study 2 tests Hypothesis 3, the moderated mediation model, in a controlled laboratory setting. In this study, I manipulate the source of change and uncover an important boundary condition for the effect of status loss on helping.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and fifty three undergraduate students from a US university enrolled in an introductory management course participated in exchange for extra credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2(change: loss or gain) X 2(source of change: personal or other) between subjects design.

Procedure. The procedure remained the same as in study with one important difference, where we manipulated the source of change. After participants received information about how their status changed, they were given one of two reasons for this change. Specifically, particpants were told that either:

Personal change: their points increased/decreased from persuasive task 1 to persuasive task 2 , or

Other change: their teammates' points increased/decreased from persuasive task 1 to persuasive task 2.

After receiving this information participants reported their degree of other orientation, completed the hangman task, were debriefed and exited the laboratory.

Results and Discussion

Helping. Results show a significant interaction between status change and the source of change on helping (F=7.35, p=007). A one-way ANOVA between conditions shows that when the change was due to a personal change, participants in the status loss condition helped less (M = 3.91, SD = 1.10) than individuals in the status gain condition (M = 4.44, SD = .73), p = .01. However, when the change is due to other group members status change, there was no difference in helping between the loss (M = 4.34, SD = 1.77) or gain condition (M = 4.07, SD = 1.02), p = .21 (See Figure 1).

Other orientation. . Results show a significant interaction between status change and the source of change on other orientation (F=10.79, *p*=001). A one-way ANOVA between conditions shows that when the change was due to a personal change, participants in the status loss condition had lower other orientation (*M* = 3.96, *SD* = 1.58) than individuals in the status gain condition (*M* = 5.07, *SD* = 1.11), $p < .001$. However, when the change is due to other group members status change, there was no difference in helping between the loss (*M* = 4.57, *SD* = 1.44) or gain condition (*M* = 4.20, *SD* = 1.42), *p* = .266 (See Figure 2).

Moderated Mediation Analysis. PROCESS MACRO (model 8) was used to examine the full moderated mediation model. Results indicate that source of change moderates the a-path (status change on other orienation), (*B* = -1.48, *SE* = .45, *p* = .001). Further, using 5000 bootstraps, the confidence interval of the indirect effect when the source of change is personal does not contain zero, whereas the confidence interval of the indirect effect when the source of change is other does contain zero. Furthermore, the confidence interval of the difference between the indirect effects at both levels of the moderator (the index of moderated mediation; Hayes, 2015) does not contain zero (Lower CI = -.56, Upper CI = -.08). That is, results support moderated mediation (Hypothesis 3) and show that when the source of change is personal, status loss leads to a decrease in other orientation and thus helping, however when the source of change is due to others we do not see this same effect (See Figure 3).

Discussion

With this research I hope to contribute to the literature on status hierarchy by examining how status change influences interpersonal behavior. While previous research on status suggests a zero sum pattern of change (whereby loss inadvertently means an equal gain), I challenge the assumption that the resulting behaviors of such change follow this same pattern. Moreover, an

understanding of why status loss may lead to decreased helping (i.e., because of lowered other-orientation) provides insight into how organizations can reverse this effect. Moreover, while research on status change is nascent in and of itself, I emphasize the important implication that the source of the change has on the experience of status change.

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Figure 1.

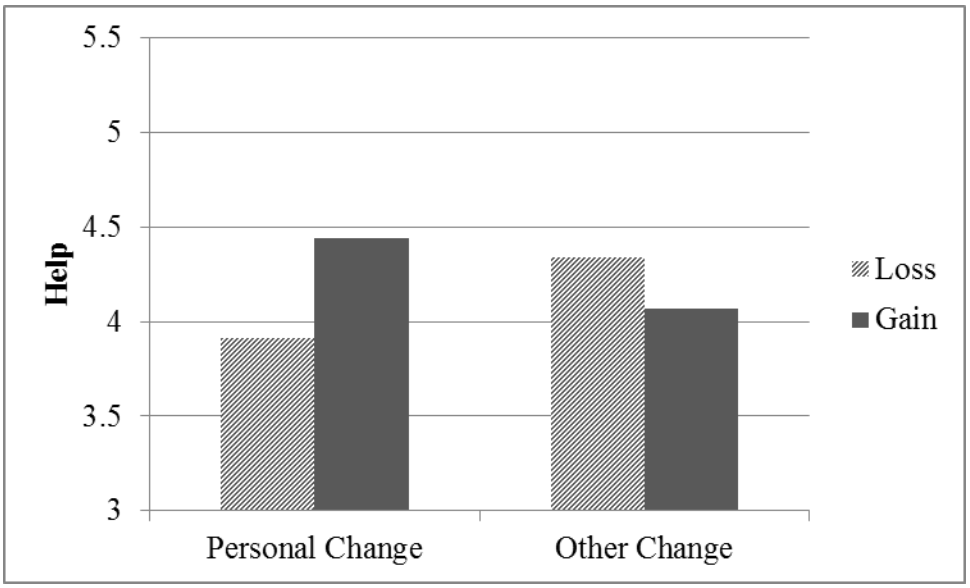


Figure 2.

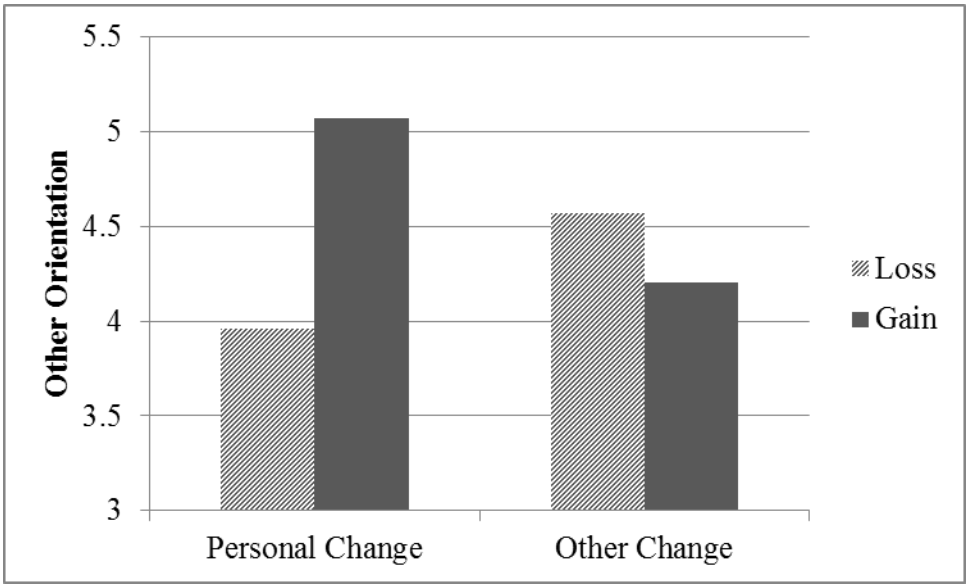
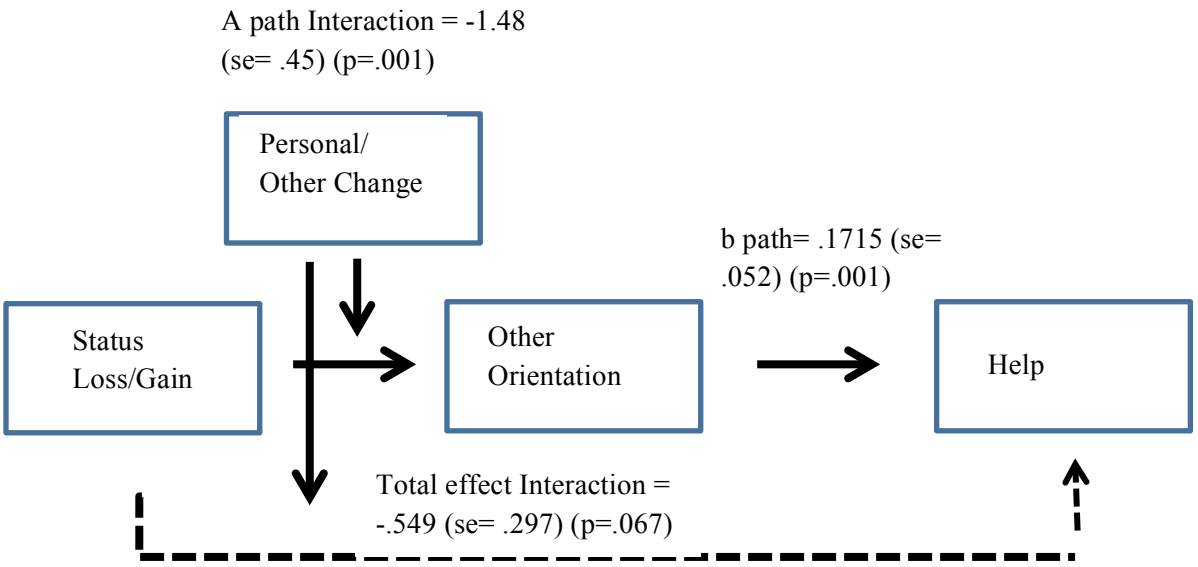


Figure 3.


A path Interaction = -1.48
(se= .45) (p=.001)
Personal/
Other Change
b path= .1715 (se=
.052) (p=.001)
Status
Loss/Gain
Other
Orientation
Help
Total effect Interaction =
-.549 (se= .297) (p=.067)